Programs and Services

Farm and Food Report, Week of January 2, 2006

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Week of January 2, 2006

SFGA CONFERENCE SEEKS TO FURTHER THE PRAIRIE FRUIT INDUSTRY

"Welcome to our 'An Industry in Motion' conference," says the invitation brochure. "Whether you currently own an established operation or are just now looking into opportunities in the fruit industry, this conference offers something for you."

"You can make money growing fruit in Saskatchewan," says Charon Blakley of the Saskatchewan Fruit Growers Association (SFGA). "That is partly what we wish to convey to participants on January 13 and 14 in Saskatoon at our annual conference during Crop Production Week. With today's focus on health and the importance of a healthy diet, we have a huge potential in Saskatchewan. The cleanliness of our environment compared to that of other parts of the world is also a big advantage."

The SFGA event is designed to set the stage for the future of the fruit industry, and the agenda is loaded with topics ranging from beginner interests to very advanced issues.

Here is a sample...

Brian Goldsworthy of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada in St. John's, Newfoundland, and Neri Vautour of the Wild Blueberry Association of North America (WBANA) will talk about the history of WBANA, its role in promoting the consumption and use of wild blueberries by the public and by the food and beverage industry, and how this was fostered to help growers and processors achieve their marketing objectives.

"What can we learn from the WBANA?" asks Blakley rhetorically. "What steps does the prairie fruit industry need to take for further development? Where do we start? Where do we want to go? How do we get there? These are questions Scott Wright, the Director of the Crop Development Branch at Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food, will help answer as he facilitates an interactive workshop to co-operatively brainstorm these and other questions."

Joe Novak, a crop development analyst at SAF, has been working on developing tools and resources to help producers determine their own profit levels and to work on enterprise analysis as well as breakeven yields and prices. He is a strong promoter of the economic potential of Saskatchewan-grown fruit, according to Blakley.

Another presenter, Karen Tanino of the Department of Plant Sciences at the University of Saskatchewan, will address how to increase prairie fruit production for domestic and export purposes. Her presentation will also cover food issues in general.

Arne Strom of Sherwood Forest Orchard and Tyler Weisbrod of Loon Creek Saskatoons will share some of the things they learned when they attended the International Food Exhibition in London recently.

"This presentation will ask us if fruit growers can meet the challenges and expectations of international buyers," explains Blakley, "and, at the same time, achieve the potentially high rewards available in the export market for saskatoon berries."

Conference participants will be updated on the programs and services being offered through the Renewal initiative. It includes programs ranging from the Canadian Farm Business Advisory Services to the Canadian Agricultural Skills Service.

On Saturday, Bob Bors, Rick Sawatzky, and Linda Matthews from the Fruit Program at the University of Saskatchewan will each host sessions at the conference to share their expertise on fruit processing, plum, hazelnuts, haskap and cherries. Presentations will provide an introduction to these crops from a prairie perspective, covering the best varieties to grow, University of Saskatchewan research on these crops and some of the key growing requirements.

In addition, SAFFruit Development Specialist Clarence Peters will talk about apples and saskatoons, and he covers the basic growing how-tos— including markets, site selection and development, cultural requirements, and pest management. The importance of pruning to maintaining the health, productivity, and longevity of the orchard will also be stressed.

Blakley emphasizes the importance of the networking aspects of the conference. "You can learn a lot from other people who face the same challenges as you as a grower."

The SFGA "An Industry in Motion" conference takes place at the Heritage Inn. To register, call (306) 743-5333.

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FOOD SAFE FARM PRACTICES PROGRAM A SIGN OF THE TIMES

Food safety is becoming an increasingly important topic within the agriculture community.

Around the globe, food safety programs and practices are becoming an essential component to regular business and trade. Within Canada, many commodity groups are taking a proactive approach and are beginning to develop and implement food safety programs.

One such group is the Canadian Sheep Federation, which introduced a national Food Safe Farm Practices Program designed to provide assurance that the sheep and lamb products on our farms are produced through a safe and verifiable process, according to Saskatchewan Sheep Development Board Executive Director Gordon Schroeder.

"The Food Safe Farm Practices Program is driven by the Canadian sheep industry for the Canadian sheep industry. A technical committee, including sheep producers and technical experts in sheep production and food safety, from across the country, developed program materials for the initiative."

The sheep producers were an integral part of the process, explains Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food (SAF) Livestock Development Specialist Tara Jaboeuf. "They provided clear input to make the program efficient, non-invasive and affordable."

This food safety program was developed under the auspices of the Canadian On-Farm Food Safety Program (COFFS), and funded through the new Agricultural Policy Framework.

"COFFS is a producer-driven partnership between industry and government, that helps national commodity organizations develop and implement on-farm food safety programs," says Jaboeuf. "The sheep industry's program has undergone technical review by the CFIA, and has been approved as a result. We are now starting on implementation of the program across Canada."

In essence, the program is based on an internationally recognized hazard control system called HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points). This is a proactive approach to the identification, evaluation and control of food safety hazards. It is endorsed by government health agencies worldwide, including the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) and the United States Department of Agriculture.

"Most producers are already adopting the practices stipulated in the program, "Jaboeuf points out. "The program represents a formalization of these practices, demonstrating to the public and consumer that their food is indeed a safe and healthy choice.

"Participating in this nationally recognized food safety program will demonstrate to customers that producers have exercised

due diligence in their production activities to minimize the possibility of physical, chemical and/or biological hazards."

Jaboeuf adds that "some of the benefits of participating in an on-farm food safety program include maintaining or expanding domestic and international markets; increased management effectiveness, with efficiencies and cost savings on–farm; employee knowledge on-farm; and increased consumer confidence."

The Sheep Development Board's Schroeder concurs. "Saskatchewan sheep farmers already provide a safe, high quality meat, milk and wool product to our customers; however, we are now entering a time when it will become even more necessary that we demonstrate that the food we produce is safe."

Tara Jaboeuf has taken the initiative one step further:

"We have decided to try something different. We are teaming up with the Environmental Farm Plan co-ordinator and holding workshops in Saskatoon and Regina as a pilot."

The registration is free for both workshops, and lunch is provided. Both events will be held from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. at the Agriculture Business Centre at 3830 Thatcher Avenue in Saskatoon on February 24, and on February 25 at a location yet to be determined in Regina.

To find out more about the Food Safe Farm Practices Program, call the sheep development board or Tara Jaboeuf at Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food at (306) 933-5099.

For more information, contact:

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HONEYWOOD NURSERY A HERITAGE OPERATION WITH AGRITOURISM APPEAL

When Bert Porter established the Honeywood Nursery during the 1930s west of Shellbrook, he likely didn't suspect he would one day become one of the most celebrated horticulturalists in North America.

The nursery is located on a quarter section about four miles south and one mile west of Parkside. It has operated for over 65 years. Before he passed away in 2000 at the age of 99, Porter had developed nearly 40 different strains of lilies marketed around the world.

In 1971, A.J. Porter received the E.H. Wilson Award, which is the highest award given by the North American Lily Society. A collection of his hybridized lilies was also awarded a Silver Medal at the Stuttgart Outdoor Garden Show.

After his death, the nursery faced potential obliteration until a group of local investors decided to acquire the property and operate it with the help of a dedicated group of volunteers.

David Moe is Chairman of the Board of Honeywood Nursery and one of the shareholders.

"Porter was born in Guilford, England, in 1901. He immigrated to Canada when he was six years old. He grew up on his parents' farm in Parkside, where he became a schoolteacher. During the early years of the Depression, he struggled to support his family on the meager salary of a teacher. He left the profession and started selling nursery stock, including shrubs, flowers, fruit trees, etc., door to door. If customers were unable to pay for nursery stock when it arrived, he absorbed the loss and planted the stock at his farm.

"At the same time, he also started a market garden featuring strawberries and raspberries. It didn't take him long to realize that

many of the varieties of fruit he was growing were not fully hardy for his region. This led to a lifelong pursuit of breeding to produce plants which would be high quality, disease resistant, and hardy for the prairies."

Moe and his colleagues have inherited a true jewel, and they know it. The mission of Honeywood Heritage Nursery, as they see it, is to preserve, restore and operate it as a Parkside community heritage property. Naturally, this means exploring its tourism potential.

Ian McGilp is Industry Development Manager at Tourism Saskatchewan. He is simply in awe of the resource the nursery constitutes for the tourism industry.

"Many of the flowering crab-apple varieties, like Spring Snow, growing in the yards of residential districts in the province were developed at this place. It is one of those places in Saskatchewanthat is a hidden gem," says McGilp

"There are different markets for its offerings. There are people who would be interested in seeing the beautiful orchards and flowers at different times of the growing season. In the spring, there are the blossoms. Of course, you have all the apple trees and different fruit trees blossoming. It is just beautiful. The early part of summer—in July—is when the lilies are in bloom, and there are all kinds of varieties of these lilies with all sorts of different colours. Some that are almost jet black in colour; others are pink, rosy and orange, of course, yellow and combinations of those colours."

Incidentally, three of Bert Porter's most popular lily introductions are the Earlibird, Happy Thoughts and Flaming Giant varieties. The Flaming Giant variety is known as Moulin Rouge in Holland. It is grown by the hundreds of acres for the cut flower trade.

As the summer unfolds at Honeywood Nursery, new attractions emerge, explains McGilp.

"Later on during the summer, when the fruit has grown and is ready to be picked, you can come and enjoy the preserves made from the fruit. It is fun also to see different kinds of fruit growing on the same tree, as well, because there are some apple trees on which different limbs were grafted which yield different types of apples. I have actually seen different kinds of apples growing on the same tree."

And then there are the fall colours that show up towards the end of September.

"It is a beautiful stop, less than a two-hour drive from Saskatoon, on paved roads all the way, which would be very interesting for people in particular attending conventions in Saskatoon to go through and visit, and lots of photographs and strolls through these groves of trees could be enjoyed," McGilp says.

"The diversity of trees is remarkable, as well. There are all sorts of tree varieties like oak, maple, Siberian larch and birch. I appreciate the greenery and diversity."

Be sure to catch any of the events that take place at Honeywood Nursery every year. You won't be disappointed. To find out more, visit: www.honeywood-lilies.ca.

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"THE BIG PICTURE CROP" SUNFLOWER SEMINAR COMIN G T O MOOSE JAW

On a recent cold Saturday in November, a dozen brave riders sat on their horses, herding 100 cows back from pasture along the Qu'Appelle Valley. In the background, fields of brown, frozen sunflower still awaited harvest.

"Sunflowers have a reputation as a crop you harvest in November or December after the snow flies," explains Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food (SAF) Crop Development Specialist Elaine Moats, "and yet, under normal conditions, sunflowers are off earlier than that. They are a pretty dependable money-making crop, which is perhaps the most important characteristic of sunflowers."

Moats and industry partners are getting ready for a one-of-a-kind seminar on January 24 and 25 at the Heritage Inn in Moose Jaw called Sunflower: The Big Picture Crop. "We called it that because we believe sunflowers have a bigger role to play in crop production and value-added agriculture in Saskatchewan than they have been given credit for."

One of the obstacles sunflower growers face in Saskatchewan, Moats points out, is market access.

"Most of the sunflowers grown in Saskatchewanat this time are intended for the birdseed market, and sold into southern Alberta, North Dakota or Manitoba. We have a few processors—the biggest one is Monty Bergquist's Sun Country Farms at Langham—producing snack-food sunflower seeds. We probably harvested about 35,000 acres of sunflowers this past growing season in Saskatchewan.

"Originally, most of the sunflowers we grew were crushed for cooking oil. There was a crusher in Manitoba as well as the United States. But with the strengthening of the canola industry, we don't have any sunflower crushers in Canada anymore," explains Moats..."Certainly, the snack-food market for the hulled sunflower seeds and the birdseed market are very big markets. One of the largest confection processors in Canada is Spitz Sunflower Seeds based out of southern Alberta."

Moats believes the seminar will provide useful information to growers, potential new producers and people who are looking for ways to market their sunflowers differently.

"We will be providing information on improved ways of growing sunflower, whether it is in terms of weed control, timing of seeding, or other factors that will allow producers to get a good quality crop off the field a little bit earlier. It is important to know that we don't have any plant breeders in Canada, and virtually all the seed is imported from the United States. There are new developments in seed treatment and disease control that are significant because some seed treatments are not allowed in Canada."

The seminar will feature a presentation by the director of the Canadian National Sunflower Association, Mel Reimer, who will bring participants up to date on developments on the Canadian scene.

"There a couple of sunflower roasters in Manitoba that he will tell us about," says Moats, "and there are opportunities with China in the sunflower business. The NuSun market class has the mid-oleic oil profile and is in strong demand from the cooking oil industry. Commercial processors use NuSun oil in their deep fryers because of its cooking properties. Not only is it a healthier oil, but it also remains stable longer under the higher temperatures used in the food processing industry."

Cliff Powlowski, the Variety Testing Co-ordinator for Saskatchewan, will provide an update on his results that are printed in the grain variety guide every year.

"There is also some new work on herbicides that are registered or coming down the pipe that SAF Provincial Weed Control Specialist Clerk Brenzil will tell us about. SAF Plant Disease Specialist Penny Pearse is going to talk about new fungicide registrations. SAF Insect/Pest Management Specialist Scott Hartley will talk about some of the insect concerns, as insect pressures vary from year to year, Moats says.

"Bill May is doing research on yield and adaptation, comparing sunflower and flax to other crops like mustard. Monty Bergquist of Sun Country Farms exports a wide variety of bird food mixes that include sunflower seeds. He asks questions like: is there room for small crushers or de-hullers? He has put a lot of thought into the new uses for sunflower seeds," Moats points out.

Also, Vern Racz and Dave Christensen of Prairie Feed Resource Centre will elaborate on where sunflower seeds fit in beef or dairy cattle feeding programs.

"When you add sunflower seed to the ration, it affects the feed intake of the cattle, which has an impact on the cost of the ration," according to Moats. "It affects the conjugated linoleic acid level in both the milk and meat, and therefore could potentially make the milk and the meat healthier, which would bring about significant marketing advantages."

Moats and her colleagues invite everyone interested in sunflowers to take a second look at "The Big Picture Crop."

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RANCHERS KEY TO BISON'S RETURN TO GRASSLANDS NATIONAL PARK

For many visitors at Grasslands National Park, this was the next logical step. The reintroduction of the Plains bison in this protected territory—born out of the foresight of a few visionaries, including landowners along the Frenchmen River valley near Val Marie— establishes new standards in relationship-building.

"We are receiving 70 plains bison from Elk Island National Park," explains Heritage Presentation and Visitor Services Co-ordinator Colin Schmidt. "They are young animals: 30 female calves, 30 male calves and 10 one-year old females. A small holding facility of 40 acres in the West Block will be their home for their first winter."

What made the reintroduction possible is the way in which the process engaged park neighbours, including a number of stock growers, with their expertise in how to best maintain harmony between the needs of landowners and those of the park.

"While we created our Park Management Plan, which is an obligation of all national historic sites and parks, we realized we required a great deal of input," says Schmidt. "We set up an advisory committee made up of stakeholders like ranchers, scientists, tourism operators, reeves and RM representatives. As a result, it was identified that bison were the preferred means of restoring grazing in the park."

One of the prerequisites to reintroducing the bison was the establishment of a suitable perimeter fence.

"Come spring, when the grass is greened up on the native prairie, we'll open those gates at the holding facility and the bison will be allowed to roam within that larger fenced area over 70 square miles."

But in order to build the fence, park authorities needed some guidance. They got it from folks who know best what makes sense in the area: ranchers.

"Including their insight in our planning efforts proved invaluable, says Schmidt. "We went from eight-foot posts down to seven-foot posts, and realized substantial savings on materials. In terms of the wire as a result, we ended up switching from conventional hi-tensile page wire to five strands of barbed wire.

The barbed wire is about 18 inches above the ground. It is a little higher than what we are used to. That allows Pronghorns to go back and forth with greater ease. It was also recommended that the top two wires be smooth, so there are no barbs to these wires. In the event a mule or whitetail deer gets caught, that allows them to kick sideways without hooking a tendon into a barb."

Fence construction started in April and was completed in October. Meanwhile, an elaborate strategy was developed to minimize stress for the animals when they would arrive.

"This is what is referred to in the reintroduction world as a soft release," Schmidt explains. "A hard release would just be bringing the animals, dropping them on the ground and hoping that they make it. A soft release is when you try to take steps to mitigate the harshness of moving from a previous facility, by giving the animals time get used to a new location. Thanks to that small holding area, they will able to adapt to a new horizon, to an area that has very few trees compared to Elk Island, and perhaps to a different climate."

It so happens that the bison holding facility is located over an old Russian rye field.

"We are putting them there to chew down the exotic vegetation and help the native prairie come back. It is easily accessible because it is close to a road. It is out of sight, away from where visitors typically travel, so it won't scar the horizon. We have some oats hay stored up for their first winter."

"Having at a very minimum 50 animals—we eventually chose 70—allows us to capture 99 per cent of the genetic material of the source herd. We wanted to capture as much genetic diversity from Elk Island as possible and bring it over here for our herd. We see ourselves growing into the 250- to 300-animal range. We didn't want to bring all those animals at once. This allows us to start small, adapt, and get used to managing bison in our park. We can grow with them, says Schmidt."

The reintroduction of bison to the area is a major milestone for those involved: neighbours, members of the community and the Parks Canada organization. The return of the bison will give those who earn their livelihood along the Frenchman River something else to be proud of, believes Schmidt.

"Neighbours have long wanted us to reintroduce the role of grazing, as they noted it was good for the grass early in the

development of Grasslands National Park. This acknowledges ranchers' stewardship efforts to this day."

"The great thing about bringing the bison back is the restoration of the grazing element that was missing from the park since the land was acquired. It also helps in the overall conservation of Plains bison in North America, by having yet one more herd on a large expanse of native prairie behaving 'as wild as possible.' This will be one more herd from which animals can be drawn for future conservation initiatives.

"The bison is an icon of the prairies. Having them helps provide visitors to the park that connection with the prairies, and a fuller assemblage of species on the ground."

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